

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1966

Vol. 18, No. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL THE SPY WHO WAS MIKE SHAYNE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Somewhere deep inside Castro's Cuba lay hidden a secret which could explode the free world into war. All the C.I.A. asked Shayne to do was—get it—and come back alive!

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LEO MARGULIES

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The Pickup Man

by JACK RITCHIE



*The kidnapping scheme seemed foolproof
in every respect. Actually . . . it was!*

I GOT A COKE from the machine and went back outside again. In the shade of the station, I tilted a chair against the wall next to Pop Demeter.

He filled his pipe slowly. "Starting to cool off," he said. "It's just one hundred in the shade now."

I drank some of the coke and squinted at the desert and the empty road. "Only eight cars today."

Pop nodded. "Business like usual. No run on gas."

A speck appeared on the highway near the horizon.

"Maybe a customer," I said. I looked at my watch. It was five-fifteen.

We watched the car get bigger.

"It's not slowing down," Pop said.

The big Buick roared by the station.

Pop drew on his pipe. "I hope he knows it's fifty miles to the next gas station," he said:

I took my time finishing the coke and then got up. "See you sometime tomorrow," I told him.

It was dry-hot inside my car. I rolled down all the windows before I started the motor and pulled out.

After two miles, I stopped beside the sun-whitened skeleton of the wagon beside the road. I got out and walked to the thick clump of cactus behind it.

When I came back with the package, I put it on the front seat of the car.

My speedometer clicked off another seven miles before I turned left up the line of car tracks to my cabin. I carried the box inside and shoved it under my bunk.

I sat down and listened.

Yes. I could hear it. Far up and very faint.

After supper I read some old magazines for a couple of hours and then went to bed.

I slept late the next morning and I'd just finished my first cup of coffee when the door burst open and they poured into the room.

There were about seven or eight in uniform and some who weren't, but they all held guns.

I put up my hands. "What's this all about?"

They lost no time in handcuffing and searching me. One of the cops turned to a big gray-haired man.

"He's clean, Captain Ferguson."

A detective bent down on one knee beside my bunk. "It's under here," he grunted.

"Be careful how you handle it," Ferguson said. "It's probably got his fingerprints on it and every little bit helps. Not that we need much help now."

The detective pulled the package out by the cord and set it on table.

Ferguson seemed in a good humor. "Now I suppose you got some interesting story for this? Like how somebody paid you ten dollars to pick it up and hold it for him until he called for it?"

"No," I said. "I found it beside the road while I was driving home yesterday."

Ferguson grinned. "And I suppose you're going to tell me that you don't know what's in it?"

"I don't," I said.

"Then aren't you even a little bit curious?"

I shrugged. "I figure it fell out of somebody's car. Maybe there'll be something about it in the Hainsville Desert Herald and I'll get a reward."

Ferguson stopped grinning. "We both know what's in that package. Two hundred thousand dollars."

My eyes went to the table. "I'm not saying any more until I know what this is all about."

Ferguson took a deep breath. "All right. I'll tell you what it's all about—just to make it official and

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so that you got no complaints for your lawyer. Last week Wendell Peters, a Los Angeles real estate broker, disappeared. The next morning his partner, James McGivern, received a note in the mail informing him that Peters had been kidnapped and was being held for two hundred thousand dollars ransom. McGivern notified the police."

I indicated the box. "And that's the two hundred thousand?"

Ferguson nodded. "Surprised, aren't you?"

I looked around the room. "And all of you saw me pick it up?"

Ferguson smiled. "We didn't. But you were seen just the same."

I raised my cuffed hands and wiped some of the sweat from my forehead. "I didn't see anybody."

"You forgot to look up," Ferguson said. "We had a helicopter over the area. After you picked up the package, the pilot followed your car to this cabin. We kept out of sight, but we had this place surrounded in less than forty-five minutes."

I cleared my throat. "You had this place surrounded in less than forty-five minutes? Then why did you wait until this morning before you broke in?"

"Because in kidnapping cases our first concern is for the safety of the victim. We didn't know whether you had him here or not or what you might do if we tried to get to you. So we decided to play

along with the note you sent to McGivern. And according to that you promised to release Peters at noon today."

I looked at the clock on the shelf. "It's only ten-thirty," I reminded him.

Ferguson smiled again. "It turned out that we didn't have to wait that long after all. This morning McGivern got a note in the mail telling him where to look for Peters. And ten minutes ago we got a message that he'd been found unharmed."

Now he took a notebook out of his pocket.

"What's your name?"

"Fred Masters," I said.

"Occupation?"

"Auto mechanic."

"Where do you work?"

Pop Demeter's Garage and Station," I said. "About nine miles up the road. I show up there every morning and hang around. Whenever there's any work, I do it."

"But that's not enough for a living, is it?"

"It is if you live in the desert," I said.

I thought they were going to take me to the jail at Hainesville, but instead the line of cars turned toward the coast.

After two hours we turned through the gates of what appeared to be a fairly large estate.

I was taken into the big house and led into what was probably called the library. There were at

least a dozen people in the room, mostly policemen.

Ferguson pushed me toward the man in an easy chair. "Well, Peters, we got him."

Peters looked tired and he needed a shave. He studied me. "About the same height," he said. "but that's all I can say. He always wore a mask and loose clothes."

Somebody handed Peters another drink and he told his story again for the benefit of Captain Ferguson. "I spent the evening with my partner and his wife and left at about eleven-thirty. I'd just finished putting my car in the garage when this masked man stepped out of the darkness. He didn't speak. As a matter of fact I never heard his voice at any time. He just indicated that I should turn around, and then he handcuffed and blindfolded me. He led me to a car and forced me to lie down in the back. He tied my legs and covered me with a blanket."

Peters sipped his drink. "We drove for hours. Or at least it seemed like hours. And then finally he stopped. He removed the rope from my legs and led me, still blindfolded, up a rough path. When he removed the blindfold, I appeared to be in some kind of a tunnel."

A tall, balding man spoke up. "It was one of those abandoned mine shafts in the hills. I got the note with the directions where to

find him in this morning's mail."

"Let's see it, McGivern," Ferguson said.

McGivern handed him a folded sheet and an envelope. "Your men have checked these for fingerprints," he said. "Nothing on the notepaper. There were some prints on the envelope, but they turned out to be the postman's—just like with the others."

Ferguson read the note and then held it in front of me. "I suppose you've never seen this before?" he asked.

I read the typewritten lines.

You will find Peters in the abandoned Maratosa Mine. Shaft marked with pole and handkerchief.

"No," I said. "I've never seen this before."

Ferguson examined the envelope. "Postmarked yesterday noon?" He frowned for a moment and then looked at me. "That was even before the money was dropped off. You must have been pretty certain that nothing would go wrong."

"Could I have a cigarette?" I asked.

Somebody lit one for me and Peters went on with his story. "He handcuffed me to some kind of an iron stanchion. It was set firmly in a huge block of cement and possibly he had made it for just that purpose. When he left me, I tried to get out of the handcuffs. When that failed, I attempted to drag the

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cement block, but it was much too heavy to move. I shouted for help, of course, but evidently no one heard me."

"Did he leave you alone there all this time?" Ferguson asked.

Peters shook his head. "No. He came back every night with food and water. According to my watch, it was always about nine o'clock."

Ferguson took a sheet of paper from one of the detectives and let me see it. "And I suppose you never saw this before either?"

I read the note.

I have your partner. You can have him back for two hundred thousand dollars. You have forty-eight hours to get the money. I will send instructions. Do not notify police or Peters will be dead.

"No," I said. "I never saw this before."

He held up another sheet of paper. "Or this?"

I read:

Follow directions exactly. Put money in shoe boxes. Make one package. Wrap in brown paper.

Tomorrow take Highway 1-94 west from Hainesville. Drive 12-6 miles. You will find ruin of wagon beside road, right hand side. Put package in clump of cactus behind wagon. 5:30 P.M.

Be alone. If I smell a cop within ten miles, I will kill Peters. Otherwise I will let him go at noon on Thursday.

I took the cigarette out of my

mouth for a few seconds. "Look, if I were going to pick up two hundred thousand dollars in ransom money, wouldn't I wait until night?"

Ferguson shrugged. "You got anxious. You didn't want the money to get sun-burned."

"And wouldn't I be curious about whether the money was really in the package?" I asked. "Wouldn't I at least open it?"

"How do I know what goes through your mind?" Ferguson said irritably.

The handcuffs were beginning to hurt my wrists a little. "This kidnapping," I said. "When did it happen?"

"The fifteenth," Ferguson snapped. "Friday night. But that shouldn't be new to you."

I smiled slowly. "But I was in jail."

Ferguson's eyes narrowed.

"I was in jail," I said again. "Friday, I got drunk and in a fight and the sheriff in Hainesville put me in a cell. It was about supper-time and he kept me there until noon Saturday."

Ferguson's face became expressionless. He turned abruptly and went to the phone.

When he finished, his face was flushed. He talked to the entire room. "The sheriff says that he was in jail Friday night."

Then he glared at me. "Don't tell me that you were just an innocent boob who happened to pick

up the package before the kidnapper could get to it?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I guess that's what happened. I was driving slow and I happened to see this package sticking out of that clump of cactus."

The room was silent for half a minute and then Peters chuckled. "It looks like the kidnapper spent all his time for nothing. We've still got the money."

He got up, took a small penknife from his pocket, and cut the cord around the package. There were six shoe boxes and he opened one of them. He frowned slightly. "Oh, I see. You didn't put any money in the package after all, did you, James?"

James McGivern moved forward and opened the other five shoe boxes. A tic began working on the side of his face. "But I did put the money in these boxes. I swear I did."

Peters stared for a long moment and his eyes became speculative.

I PARKED my car beside the station, got a coke, and joined Pop Demeter outside.

He turned a page of the newspaper. "Nobody seems to know just what happened except that two hundred thousand dollars is missing. And reading between the lines, I get the feeling that Peters thinks his partner pulled a fast one and pocketed all the money himself."

"Well," I said. "You and I know better and I guess we're the only ones."

Pop tapped dottle from his pipe. "First time I ever kidnapped anybody. Don't seem to be much to it. Any hitches on your end of the deal?"

"No," I said. "I made sure the copter couldn't see me before I dug up your package and put the one McGivern left in its place. In that loose sand it didn't take me more then a minute or two to make the switch and smooth things out."

Pop grinned. "When that copter saw you crawl out of the cactus with our special package everybody naturally thought that you had the two hundred thousand and took out after you. Mighty busy on the road for a while. But everything calmed down about sundown and I drove out and dug up the money."

I sipped the coke. "The police probably got a record of the serial numbers of those bills, so we'll just sit on the money for a few years. Or maybe we can shop around careful and find somebody who'll give us fifty cents on the dollar. We got time."

We watched a car moving toward us on the horizon. After ten minutes it slowed down and pulled up beside one of the pumps.

Pop Demeter got off his chair. "Tenth car today. I may get rich yet."

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